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ON SELF-CULTURE.

BY J. SAXON MILLS.

(Continued from page 199).

But to return to our imaginary student. We will suppose that he has received simply an elementary English training, and knows little or nothing of the grammar of any foreign language. Shall we advise him to start at once the study of such a grammar as absolutely essential to his purpose? I for one am not going to deny that a man may find ample satisfaction and means of the highest culture in English literature alone. Many people spend valuable time in acquiring smatterings of foreign tongues, which, if devoted to the systematic reading of English literature, would be infinitely more profitable. To our imaginary student I would say, if your leisure time is very scant, employ it in the study of your own great classics, and do not sacrifice the spiritual benefits you have at hand, by aiming at others which you may never be able really to attain; and above all waste no time in acquiring language for purely conversational purposes. Remember that any average parrot can be trained to say "Pass the salt" or "Walk in" in any language under the sun. Language is valuable simply as a key to literature, and it is with that object clearly before your mind that you are to begin the study of any foreign grammar. With the proviso then that our own literature has for very essential reasons the first claim upon each of us, what foreign language shall we choose for study if our time permits? And, firstly, what of Latin and Greek? How far are these essential to any wide culture? I believe a great deal of nonsense is talked on this subject; both languages, especially Greek, are exceedingly difficult, nay, for most people impossible to acquire without a careful preliminary school training. The greater number even of

our schoolboys who toil for years at their classical grammars never arrive at any vital contact with the ancient literatures. Except in cases of exceptional ability and large leisure I am inclined to think that these languages, especially Greek, exact an amount of study disproportionate to the culture they are likely to confer. We must remember, however, that thanks to the labours of the late master of Balliol and many others, a man may possess a very fair knowledge of the ancient literatures without knowing a word of their language. I am quite sensible how much is lost by the process of translation. The heroic simplicity of Homer, the tragic grandeur of Aeschylus are terribly diluted in their transition to the English page. Nor do I underrate the peculiar charm and distinction of being able to read our Greek Plato with our toes to the fire, the infallible test, according to Macaulay, of an exquisite culture. It is idle however, to maintain that Plato, Thucydides, Seneca and Epictetus cannot speak to us in their modern dress as intelligibly and directly as they spoke to the ancient Greek and Roman. Nor need I repeat what I have said elsewhere that modern literatures hold in solution what is best in the spirit, and reproduce even the form of the ancient classics; that for instance our Samson Agonistes or Goethe's Iphigeneia embody very faithfully the severe beauty of the classical drama, while the stately flow of the hexameter and the grand simplicity of ancient Epic reappear in such a poem as Hermann and Dorothea. I have never been able to understand why Greek and Latin should be regarded as a sort of Siamese twins, and why a successful and profitable study of one should be impossible without some knowledge of the other. A little knowledge of Latin is not a dangerous but a very useful thing. It helps us to understand the meaning and composition of the more difficult words in our own vocabulary. Besides, the difficulties of the grammar, need prevent few from soon reading with ease and enjoyment the Aeneid or the Odes of Horace.

But which modern language claims the first attention of our student? I know there exists a general opinion, dating from very early days in our history, that a knowledge of French is part of the essential equipment of an English gentleman. Such an opinion can no longer be held. Believing

that literature gives its chief, almost sole value to a language, I cannot allow that French should have the precedence over German. I do not wish to disparage the delights of the French novel, nor the importance of French science, philosophy, and criticism. Here, however, we have again to remember that almost everything of classical rank in French prose-literature has been rendered into English, and English too that invariably reproduces something of the easy and graceful charm of the original. French poetry, however, just the province where translation fails, and which demands for its appreciation a knowledge of the original language, remains in its rhymes and rhythms doggedly unintelligible to Teutonic ears. Again, the principles and products of the Augustan age of French literature have been finally discredited by the literary revolution known as the "Romantic movement." We have left far behind us the drama of Corneille and Racine, and passed on to an age of wider sympathies and enlightened freedom. No, if our student wishes, outside the borders of his own literature, a fertile and satisfying criticism of life; a truly literary modern drama; a wealth of ballad saga and romance elsewhere unequalled; a poetry as exquisite in art as it is profound in moral suggestion, and for which his ear will need no elaborate metrical training: or, finally, if he wishes to acquire a language which is, and has been for a hundred years, the expression of the most advanced thought in every department of human knowledge, let him open his German grammar. That grammar presents so little difficulty, especially to an Englishman, that I can positively absolve no one, who desires to widen his knowledge of the best that has been said and done in the past, from mastering the German language.

I have no space to discuss in detail the methods and advantages of historical or philosophical study. The same principle, however, applies here. Both studies must conduce directly to a man's spiritual and moral improvement. In history especially we must beware of acquiring mere indigestible information, a series of battles, murders, and sudden deaths which may be about as educative as a detailed study of the Police News. Unless we are in imaginative sympathy with the age we are studying, or are deriving from our reading some political insight and foresight, our history will be of little advantage. To philosophy, which deals directly

with the practical conduct of life, the same caution perhaps does not apply; though even here we are in danger of becoming entangled in a net of mere speculative enquiry and metaphysical mystification. It is impossible to commend too highly the moral treatises of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca—which, though still undeservedly neglected—are among the most precious legacies of the past. These books, easily accessible in cheap English translations, embody for us the more humane and practical development of the ancient stoic philosophy. The bracing and fortifying virtue of that teaching is by no means spent, and we may still apply to our hearts and lives its most characteristic precept to "Be strong." Another little priceless volume of the same sort is our English Florio's Montaigne, which embalms the genial and tolerant philosophy of a French gentleman of the 16th century. And need I recommend the essays of Emerson, whose pure spirituality and noble optimism is so healthy a corrective to the analytic and materialistic tendencies of our age?

To resume, then, let a man consult his own natural bias in the choice of his books and the direction of his study. And let him not be discouraged by the consciousness of his own slender attainments or narrow opportunities. A single poem of Keats or Tennyson, a single play of Shakespeare, round which our heartstrings are entwined, is worth more to us than tons of painful and pedantic learning. There has been much talk of late about the best hundred books. I am not sure that even a hundred are necessary. All I ask is that the few we possess should be real companions to us, sources of real strength and consolation. Every man, I think, should have a little library of his own. Public free libraries are useful for reference, but no one who really makes friends of books will be content with joint and public ownership. A man's library, however scant, should be a sort of visible history of his inner and higher life, each book recalling to him the satisfaction of some spiritual need or some new revelation of the True and Beautiful. In this way he will come to feel an affection not simply for the contents of his books, but personally for each individual favourite to which he has turned so often for its silent ministration of strength and refreshment. And a true book-

lover generally makes an inner choice among his books and reserves for two or three his strongest and deepest affection. Wordsworth has written a sonnet which beautifully expresses this personal feeling towards books, especially towards the few beloved favourites.

Dreams, books are each a world, and books we know
Are a substantial world both pure and good.
Round these with tendrils strong as flesh and blood
Our pastime and our happiness will grow.
There find I personal themes—a plenteous store,
Matter wherein right voluble I am
To which I listen with a ready ear.
Two shall be named preeminently dear,
The gentle lady married to the Moor
And heavenly Una with the milk-white lamb.

Let us remember then, that the end of culture is a better and nobler life, to make of us better friends, better parents, better citizens, better men. Let it never be said of us, in the words of the French poet—

“Au lieu d’un ouvrier on a fait un rêveur.”

“You have an object,” says Epictetus when comparing literary attainments with the duties of practical life, “which is this, to get home, to do your duty to your family, friends, and fellow-countrymen, to attain inward freedom, serenity, happiness, and contentment.”

Unless our self-culture contributes to these ends it is scarcely worth discussing or undertaking. Without this object and result it becomes a mere appendage or affectation, maybe still worse—for let us not forget the profound saying of the philosopher that “each other science is prejudicial unto him that hath not the science of goodness.”

A LESSON.

“IN the multitude of councillors there is wisdom” is very true if we are careful to get out of the stage in which they bring something very like confusion. There is danger in pondering over theories till it gets quite difficult to act! But all at once may come a moment when one must act on the instant or the golden moment is lost, and one finds all the pondering has made one’s mind so rich that the power of action springs up firm and stalwart and produces splendid fruit. We have read much and thought much about bringing the child’s own will to bear on conquering the child’s faults, and the other day, when I was sitting with my little daughter who is nearly three years old, I came, all at once, to such an occasion for using my “thoughts.” It seems to me such a delightful little illustration that I must tell it. I try to give the conversation accurately, for I made notes as soon as I could after it had taken place.

The little one was having one of her first lessons in drawing with the brush. She was naturally very much interested and excited, and the little feet went kick, kick against her foot-rest, making a very, to her, pleasant noise. But, said I, “little one, you must keep your feet still and firm if you want to paint.”

“Oh! but I like to make that noise.”

“Oh! mother is sorry, but she said you must keep your feet still.”

“But my toeties are dancing, they like to dance.”

“If you want to dance your ‘toeties’ you must do it at the proper time and in the proper place, and if you go on with that noise you must go upstairs. I must put the hand-bell here to ring it for nurse if you go on making that noise.”

The little face grew set and firm and the toes kept on “dancing.” Her will was up in arms against mine.

“If I don’t take care,” I thought, “we shall have a row, and obedience will be enforced at the cost of this half-hour of valuable time with mother.”

Then came the helpful “thought,” “get her will on your side.”

“Listen,” I said, “tell your toeties that they are making